Home Again – Alone Again

Shortly before leaving the service, I had applied for one of only a handful of openings for a zookeeper Training Program, in Moorpark, CA. From about 600 nationwide applicants, I was asked to come for an interview. I took leave to visit the school and meet the admissions board. The head keeper had a key question which he used to determine the applicant's suitability for their program. He asked, "*If you were working with a lion cub, and I told you to strike it as hard as you could – would you*?" The 'correct' answer was yes, but that was not my response. The animal was always right, in my opinion. I was not about to hit an animal for any reason, least of all because I was told to.

So, my love of animals would not become a career choice. With that dream squashed, I agreed to help a friend start up a retail business in Houston, Texas.

During the summer of 1978, I was barely home for a couple of weeks when I told my folks I wasn't staying. My mother was especially sad to see me leave. TSgt Carl B. Graham was the dorm chief for the building that included the WAF barracks. He had retired from the service several months before I left. He was a sweet guy who helped me deal with Bobby's departure to McGuire AFB. He was a divorcee with a son and daughter living with their mother in Houston. He was opening a gift shop in a strip mall, and needed help to renovate, stock and manage 'Mechell's' gift shop. (Named after his daughter.)

Living with Carl was – enlightening. His children, Michael and Mechell Graham, were about 9 and 10 years of age. We all went jigging for crawdads under a bridge, and the kids were amused at my squeamish handling of the snappy little creatures. Next, I learned how to de-vein shrimp and soak and clean beans before cooking. My abilities in the kitchen were limited, and money was tight, and when I shopped for groceries, Carl chastised me for spending money on dog food! The small shepherd mix was thin as it was, but I made sure he had something to eat.

After several weeks the gift shop was running well, and I wanted to spend half the day volunteering at the Houston Zoo. I was determined to get my foot in THAT door! I was well received by the young keepers, who were more than happy to let me wash cages in the small mammal house. The most beautiful resident was the southeast Asia Linsang. A small, delicate cat-like civet with a slender body, spots and big soft eyes. The scariest resident was the Binturong or bearcat. Also, of the civet family, it was a Frankenstein version of an alley cat on steroids. Finally, the filthiest creature was the tree shrew. These fast little rodents would poop in midair, slinging excrement everywhere. Cleaning their enclosure involved crawling into the exhibit, scrubbing down the tree branches, walls and floor, plus the front window. Still, I was in my element, and I loved every minute of it.

I also volunteered at the reptile house, doing the same cleaning duties. Most of the snakes were used to the intrusion and were easy to move out of the way. However, one little booger must have been hungry because he tagged me good, enough to draw blood. I stopped the cage cleaning to wash out the wound on my hand. The head keeper asked which snake got me, showing real concern, saying they were unsure if that species was poisonous or not. He wanted me to let them know immediately if I was having trouble breathing or felt any numbness. Ooookaaay…

Events I most remember while staying with Carl were the fun I had shopping at a wholesale garden nursery for plants to sell in his gift shop. And there was the glorious assault of fragrant gardenia, when Carl rolled down the window of his 240Z, to greet the gate guard at his work as a flight mechanic at the Johnson Space Center. Then, one sultry summer evening, Carl and I went to an evening club where Herbie Hancock was playing.

My stay in Houston came to an end in late November, for two reasons. Another dog related event involved a puppy under the street manhole cover. I had wrestled the cover off and was calling the whimpering puppy. Carl was in a hurry to get to his job, and kicked the manhole cover back in place. I was livid!

The second reason – my grandfather, Douglas Kent Hodgeson had died. It was time to go back home.

My folks were happy to have me home again. My brother Brian is married now and working full time with Keith Black, of racing car fame. The little house next door we first moved into was being renovated into a two story. Brian and wife would take possession. I found part-time work with Stephen's-Stained Glass on Magnolia Ave. At the same time, I enrolled with Riverside Community College to secure an associate's degree, before transferring to Cal Poly Pomona for a bachelor's degree in behavioral science.

While attending the local college, I met a young student named David Glover. He worked as a security officer at the local prison, and was, unbeknownst to me, still married. Our relationship escalated too fast and too far in that he asked my dad for my hand in marriage! Well, dad promptly told him where to get off. Dad was a staunch Republican, and that sort of thing was taboo. After that I watched David slowly succumb to depression and psychotic episodes, which endangered me more than once. I distanced myself from him as best I could.

My folks; not aware of my white man phobia; tried to set me up with John Cuomo, a longtime family friend in the construction business. Like the Lambretta scooter, John was of Italian descent and close to the same weight. He had a great, charming personality and I could see my folks were playing matchmaker. I knew when John asked me out to a Red Lobster restaurant, I had to nip this in the bud. I was honest with John about my mental baggage, and like a gentleman he bowed out. Within a year or so, my frustrated parents and I was invited to his wedding. Wearing a pretty yellow dress – I danced.

After beginning college in Pomona, I tried to envision what I would do with a Behavioral Science degree. Not seeing much opportunity here at home, I decided to go back into the military. I located a ROTC unit at Loyola-Marymount University in La Jolla, next to the beach. By signing on for two years, it would enable me to earn a commission and re-enter the Air Force as an officer. Well, at least I had a direction.

At home my mom was enjoying my company and all the 'war stories.' Since her father had just died, she appreciated the extra company while trying to help her mother cope with the sudden loneliness. I was glad to be home, yet I felt so restless and lonely myself.

One evening I was helping mom with dinner preparations when the phone rang. I answered it blandly.

'*Hello*?' Immediately the coy, boyish voice plucked at my heart.

'*Bobby!*' I gushed. '*You knew it was me*?' he asked. '*Of course, I could never forget your voice*!'

For the next 40 minutes or so we caught up with each other's lives. I paced back and forth outside the kitchen door, as far as the cord on the phone would allow. Bobby said he wanted to call because he had to tell me he was kind of serious about a girl who had two small children. I grew quiet, not liking where this was going. He explained he had just started going out with her when I came out to visit. He wanted to talk with me because he had just learned she was pregnant again. My heart sank, and I realized he was calling me for my blessing. It took all my strength to keep from crying on the phone, but I told him what he needed to hear. It was OK to let me go – the children needed a father.

Bobby asked, '*Would you have done that to me*?'

'*No Beebe*,' I whispered, '*you are my friend*….'

And in so many words, I had to let him go. A hot cinder still resides in my heart from the torch I was carrying. It blew out but would continue to smolder for the rest of my life.

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